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THE OPERATIONS OF THE 26TH INFANTRY REGIMENT (1ST
INFANTRY DIVISION) IN THE ATTACK ON THE HURTGEN FOREST,
16 NOVEMBER - 5 DECEMBER 1944
(RHINELAND CAMPAIGN)
(Personal Experience of a Regimental Assistant S-3)

Type of operation described: REGIMENTAL ATTACK IN
HEAVY WOODS.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

	<u>PAGE</u>
INDEX	1
BIBLIOGRAPHY.	2
ORIENTATION	3
Introduction	3
The General Situation.	5
The Move to Assembly Area and Preparation.	8
The Regimental Plan of Attack.	9
NARRATION	11
SUMMARY	27
ANALYSIS AND CRITICISM.	28
LESSONS	33
MAP A - Battle of France, 6 June - 15 September 1944	
MAP B - Zone of Action, Roer Offensive, November 1944	
MAP C - Attack of 26th Infantry, Hurtgen Forest, 16 November - 5 December 1944.	

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ORIENTATION

INTRODUCTION

This monograph covers the operations of the 26th Infantry Regiment, 1st U.S. Infantry Division, in the attack on the HURTGEN FOREST, 16 November - 5 December 1944 in the drive to the ROER RIVER.

A brief introduction of major events leading up to this action may help acquaint the reader with the situation in this portion of the theater and the general area where the action herein described took place.

On 6 June 1944, the British and American armies successfully invaded the ^(European) continent by simultaneous landings made in the vicinity of the CHERBOURG PENINSULA. After six weeks of bitter fighting for expansion room and build-up the First U.S. Army effected a breakthrough. (1) Rapid exploitation by all Allied Forces did not entirely annihilate the German forces in NORMANDY but broke them to the extent that they were no longer an effective fighting force. The way across FRANCE and BELGIUM was open. (2) (See Map A)

In a little over three months the western Allies had reached the borders of the Fatherland. However, the rapid advance had extended communication lines to the extent that further full-scale operations were impossible. The armies had outrun their supplies and were forced to stop. At this point

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- (1) A-1, p. 38
(2) A-2, p. 143-145

the enemy had the first breathing spell afforded him since the invasion. He took advantage of it by reinforcing and stiffening his resistance. Bitter fighting was forecast along the entire front. (3)

This was, according to the master Allied plan, the period of build-up for the final battles. Meanwhile, it was necessary "to keep up an unrelenting offensive to the extent of our means" to wear down the enemy and to gain footholds necessary for launching the final show. (4)

During this period the U.S. First and Ninth Armies moved east of AACHEN to cut that city off. Simultaneously, the U.S. First Army attacked and captured that first major German city.

The offensive drive to the RHINE was planned with all of the Allied forces taking part. The British attacking across the MAAS RIVER on the Allied left and the U.S. Third Army on the right.

As it is generally known the first attempt to secure a RHINE bridgehead by an airborne invasion in the north during September 1944 had been unsuccessful. The U.S. Third Army was now butting its head against the strongest sections of the West Wall. (5) These factors no doubt contributed to the decision to launch the main effort with the U.S. First and Ninth Armies -- the U.S. Ninth to the left and abreast of the First. The main effort was to be made by VII Corps attacking east and southeast of AACHEN to gain crossings of the ROER RIVER north of DUREN, then proceeding to capture COLOGNE on the banks of the RHINE. On the left, XIX Corps was to coordinate its attack with VII Corps, assist VII Corps in its advance,

(3) A-2, p. 176

(4) A-2, p. 184

(5) A-2, p. 200

and protect the flank of the Twelfth Army Group. (6)

THE GENERAL SITUATION

Within its zone of advance the First Army had formidable obstacles. Due east of AACHEN were the main defenses of the SIEGFRIED LINE beyond which was flat to rolling terrain dotted with towns, each a fortress. Tied in with these defenses to the south was the HURTGEN FOREST area, a rolling to rugged, heavily forested area forming a triangle AACHEN - DUREN - MONSCHAU efficiently strengthened ^{WITH} pillboxes, mines, and wire.

During the first days of November there was evidence of a strong enemy build-up on the front of the U.S. First and Ninth Armies. (As late as 25 November 1944 the First Army had identified twelve German divisions on its front with an estimated strength of 65,000 to 70,000 men.) (7) It was apparent that an attack by the First Army, particularly with VII Corps, could be successful only if our forces were strengthened.

VII Corps at this time was composed of the 1st Infantry Division in the AACHEN area, the 3d Armored Division in the STOLBERG area, and the 47th RCT of the 9th Infantry Division to the south of the Corps zone. Three additional infantry divisions were subsequently assigned to reinforce the First Army, the 4th Infantry, the 99th and the 104th. The 99th was assigned to V Corps in the EIFEL FOREST area while the 4th and 104th plus the 4th Cavalary Group and CCR of the 5th Armored Division were assigned to VII Corps for the drive. (8) Preliminary to the attack by the First and Ninth Armies in the ROER RIVER offensive a gigantic air demonstration was scheduled to

(6) A-2, p. 200

(7) A-3, p. 81

(8) A-3, p. 71

soften up the front where the main attack was to take place. As planned and executed "Operation Q" was the largest scale close support effort ever flown by the Allied Air Forces." Approximately 10,000 tons of bombs were dropped on fortified positions in cities and areas in front of the First and Ninth Armies. (9)

The VII Corps contemplated the use of the 104th Division on the left, the 1st Division in the center, and the 4th Division on the right attacking generally northeast with the objectives of seizing crossings of the ROER RIVER, prepared to continue the advance to the east on Corps order. (10) The 3d Armored Division was assigned a limited objective attack "echeloned slightly in time" behind the attack of the 1st Division to seize the HASTENRATH area. The 1st Division zone would then expand, squeezing out the 3d Armored Division. The 104th Division sector, wide at the outset, narrowed down considerably upon the division's eastward progress until finally the 104th would be squeezed out by the northeasterly movement of the 1st Division.

Prior to the 1st Division's relief by the 104th Division in the AACHEN area the division commander, General Huebner, briefed his regimental commanders on the impending operation. Shortly general areas were assigned to the regiment in wooded areas southwest of SCHEVENHUTTE for assembly upon relief by the 104th Division. The schedule of events allowed little time to be spent in assembly areas -- relief was effected on the nights of 8 - 9 November, while the ROER drive was scheduled to begin 11 November. (11)

(9) A-3, p. 73

(10) A-5

(11) Personal knowledge

The terrain in the new area differed from that in the AACHEN area immensely. The 1st Division's right flank was entirely forested, fairly rugged, and practically without trafficable roads. There was only one unimproved road, not much more than a trail, running northeast in the woods. The left portion was rolling to fairly rugged, dotted with small towns and wooded areas with a fair road net. Throughout the area vehicles were roadbound except where engineer work reinforced trails by corduroying. (12)

To the front the major enemy units identified in the zone of the division's advance were the 12th and 47th Volksgrenadier Divisions, the 12th on the north and the 47th on the south. Neither of these divisions was thought to be the best in the German Army. They had been pummeled, chastized and declared ineffective in the not too distant past. Somehow we were to learn that they had been rejuvenated. (13)

Morale in the 1st Division was excellent. From the beaches of NORMANDY the division rolled along with the First Army through FRANCE, BELGIUM, and the SIEGFRIED defenses outside AACHEN and had recently effected the surrender of that famous German city.

Casualties had been fairly heavy and although some replacements had been received, units were still somewhat short of T/O strength.

It was anticipated that close logistical support might be a problem, particularly in the right sector, because of the lack of all weather roads in the area.

The division plan of attack called for the 16th and 26th

(12) Personal knowledge

(13) A-9, p. 104

Infantry Regiments to attack simultaneously at H-Hour. The 18th Infantry was to be in reserve. The 47th RCT of the 9th Infantry Division was attached to the 1st Division and was to hold its present positions initially.

The 16th Infantry attacking on the left was to seize its first objective HAMICH, protect the left flank of the division, and maintain contact with the 3d Armored Division on the left and the 26th Infantry on the right. The 26th Infantry attacking on the right was to seize and hold its first objective, protect the right flank of the division, and maintain contact with the 4th Division on the right and the 16th Infantry on the left. Radio silence was in effect until 1030 hours D-Day. H-Hour and D-Day were to be announced. (14) Division artillery was to remain silent until 1030 hours on D-Day and was not to open fire until the scheduled preparation for the attack. (15)

THE MOVE TO THE ASSEMBLY AREA AND PREPARATION

As soon as division had notified the regiment of the impending move and assigned the general assembly area the regimental commander sent a staff officer to the SCHEVENHUTTE area to select regimental, battalion, and separate company areas. In addition the 47th RCT was to be contacted for specific information relative to the enemy, terrain, and present operations in that immediate area.

As the battalions were relieved by elements of the 104th Division, they entrucked for their forest bivouacs. By 9 November, the regiment had closed in the area and the troops

(14) A-5
(15) A-6

were made as comfortable as was possible. All organic and individual tentage was used to advantage because of the excellent cover and concealment afforded by the forest. Kitchens were brought up and released to units for the duration of the bivouac. Everyone enjoyed three hot meals a day. The troops were kept as busy as possible under the circumstances with calisthenics and light exercise in the close areas provided. Daily rains prevented any great amount of athletics. (16)

THE REGIMENTAL PLAN OF ATTACK

The 26th Combat Team had been assigned successive objectives in a northeasterly direction through the forest and beyond toward DUREN. The regimental commander decided to attack in a column of battle groups. Each of the battle groups to be made up of a rifle battalion reinforced by a platoon of tanks from the 745th Tank Battalion, a platoon of self-propelled tank destroyers (mounting 3" guns) from the 634th Tank Destroyer Battalion, and a platoon from the organic anti-tank company. ^{THE} In order of march was to be 2d Battalion Battle ^{GROUP} ₁ Regimental Forward Command Group, Cannon Company, 1st Battalion Battle Group, 3d Battalion Battle Group, Regimental Rear Command Group, and Service Company with trains.

The 2d Battalion was scheduled to attack at H-Hour on D-Day to clear the road along the axis of advance and to seize the first objective. Thereupon the battalion was to reorganize and be prepared to advance on regimental order.

The 1st Battalion was to remain in its present assembly area prepared to move on 45 minute notice, effective H-Hour,
(16) Personal knowledge

to pass through the 2d Battalion to seize the next objective, to reorganize, and be prepared to proceed to further objectives.

The 3d Battalion was also to remain in its present assembly area prepared to move on 45 minute notice, effective H-Hour, and to be prepared to assist the 2d Battalion in the attack on the initial objective, or to seize and secure other objectives assigned by regiment. The line presently held by the 47th RCT was to be the Line of Departure for the 26th Infantry. D-Day and H-Hour were to be announced. (17)

It was anticipated that resistance would be stiff at first as the 2d Battalion hit the line of fortifications and emplacements reinforced with mines and wire. (The bombing mission had not been called in to break up the close-in enemy defenses because of the proximity of friendly troops.) However, it was felt that once the enemy line was pierced we might be in a position to effect a minor breakthrough. The 1st and 3d Battalions could then be thrown in to exploit the break for what it was worth.

As previously stated the drive to the ROER had been planned to start on 11 November, weather permitting. In the event that inclement weather prevailed to prevent the preliminary close support bombing, successive postponements of 24 hours would be called until 16 November which was to be the deadline regardless of weather. If the bombing could not be accomplished by that date the ground forces would jump off without air preparation.

Rain and fog persisted through 15 November and the majority seemed to enjoy the rest and hot food, not many realizing that

(17) A-11

another 24 hours of dampness might eliminate air support.

The early morning of 16 November was cloudy and foggy but as the day progressed the clouds began to break and as planned the air bombardment took place. Artillery opened up with its close-in preparation and troops began the muddy march to the line of departure. (18)

NARRATION

The 2d Battalion jumped off at H-Hour, precisely 1245 hours, 16 November 1944, on the heels of the air and artillery preparations. (19) Heavy artillery, mortar, and small arms fire opened up on the battalion as though part of our plan. Progress was extremely slow - it always is initially when hitting a prepared defensive position. It seemed as though any movement by our troops was observed by enemy observation posts. Mortar fire was particularly accurate. Trails and fire lanes were particularly dangerous. The enemy had pillboxes and emplacements so arranged that final protective fires covered all approaches. From the start it became evident that the woods must be cleared. Any by-passed area became a threat to the flanks or rear. (20) By 1700 hours the 2d Battalion had broken through the enemy's prepared defenses after knocking out pillboxes and emplacements and was approximately 500 yards in from the line of departure. The cost had been heavy in casualties, particularly from artillery and mortars, every round was a tree burst.

During the afternoon the regimental commander decided to employ the 1st Battalion on the left of the 2d Battalion to

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- (18) Personal knowledge
(19) A-8
(20) Personal knowledge

cover the draw running southwest toward SCHEVENHUTTE. By 1830 hours the 1st Battalion had pulled abreast of, and was in contact with, the 2d Battalion. Both battalions continued to mop up enemy resistance within their areas and buttoned up for the night. (21) The events of the first day in the forest forecast a long rough battle for three or so miles before hitting the open again. The mass of enemy artillery and mortar fire received on a narrow front was indicative that the major part of enemy gun emplacements had not been destroyed by the air bombardment. The defender had every advantage in calling for supporting fires. He was waiting hidden in a camouflaged hole or bunker while the attacker walked into his prepared defensive fires. He knew every tree, bush, and trail. Our observers were able to pick no targets - there seemed to be none - they fired by guess and by God, by map and by sound. From the outset everyone learned to stay out of fire lanes, particularly the junctions. Front line troops avoided them as they had the streets in AACHEN. Besides the small arms fire, mortars had them zeroed-in and continually covered them by fire. To the rear, roads, road junctions, and fire lanes were interdicted. It was found necessary to set up mortars in small clearings in the woods where available. To the rear any lengthy use of fire lanes was avoided except that of necessity certain lanes had to be used to supply units since the only road in the area ran northeast generally, somewhat in the center of the regimental zone. That one road was little more than a trail which, during this rainy season, could not take any heavy traffic. Consequently the battalions were experiencing extreme difficulty in keeping their tanks, TD's, and other vehicles up

(21) A-7; A-8

within reach when required, even at this slow rate of movement. The platoon of engineers worked around the clock to get the road in shape by morning so that the tanks and TD's could move up to their respective battalions. (22)

As the battalions continued their attack at 0800 hours, the following morning the 2d Battalion almost immediately ran into mines and wire covered by fire from pillboxes. The battalion launched a coordinated attack with its recently arrived tanks and TD's which was successful. (It is interesting to note here that in one of the pillboxes taken, the 2d Battalion discovered an American machine gun.) This was still an extension of the SIEGFRIED defenses. By 1400 hours the 2d Battalion reported breaking through the stiff resistance to their immediate front with E Company located at Point #1, ^(MAP "C") however within a few minutes the enemy located the battalion and dropped intense artillery and mortar fire upon it. Meanwhile the 1st Battalion swept the woods to the left of the 2d Battalion on the west to prevent infiltration or attack by the enemy bouncing from the 16th Infantry's attack in the vicinity of HAMICH. Shortly before dark the battalions began to button up for the night with positions generally as shown on Map "C". (23) Because of the nature of the terrain and the aggressive enemy a tight all-around defense was now more essential than ever. Defensive fire plans were a priority. It was extremely important that units report their exact locations at all times - especially so when requesting artillery fire. As it was the artillery was experiencing a certain amount of difficulty in giving troops close support because the extreme seasonal dampness which was believed

(22) Personal knowledge

(23) A-7; A-8

to be affecting accuracy some. Moreover the friendly and target areas were covered with trees of 75-100 foot heights requiring the artillery to fire extremely accurate high angle fire in close support to prevent casualties to our troops.(24)

Operations on 18 November followed pretty much the pattern of the previous two days. The 2d Battalion going north now was stopped again at the road junction of the secondary gravel road and the trail at Point #2 by enemy defenses similar to those encountered the previous day. Again the platoon of engineers was called upon to rush the road reconstruction so that the tanks and TD's could be brought up to support the assault. Late in the day the tanks and TD's were brought up into position to support by fire. The coordinated attack jumped off after a short preparatory blasting of enemy installations by the self-propelled mounts, however, the battalion made little if any progress during the remainder of the day.

The 1st Battalion had jumped off at 0800 hours like the 2d going generally north parallel to the SCHEVENHUTTE - LANGERWEHE ROAD. Again the battalion hit stiff opposition and made small gains. The battalion holed up for the night 200 yards north of #272. (25) During the day the regimental commander ordered the 3d Battalion to move from its assembly area to occupy positions vacated by the 1st Battalion that morning. The battalion commander was called to the regimental CP to receive the order for his battalion's attack on the following day. It was the intent of the regimental commander that the 3d Battalion pass through the 2d Battalion as soon as the enemy were cleared from the road junction. The road north from

(24) Personal knowledge

(25) A-7; A-8

that point appeared to be capable of supporting armor even at this season. Moreover it was felt that if the 3d Battalion could move as soon as the 2d Battalion had cracked this line the shock action of a fresh Battalion reinforced with a platoon of tanks and a platoon of TDs might force a deep wedge into the enemy line. (26)

On the following morning the 2d Battalion successfully attacked the positions at the junction. The 3d Battalion spearheaded by tanks moved through the 2d Battalion. By 1600 hours it had taken its objective, the high ground and road junction east of LAUFENBERG (Point #3), by-passing the castle itself. Meanwhile the 2d Battalion was ordered to hold its positions to protect the regiments right flank. At the time the regiment had no contact with the unit on the right except by patrol. About 1800 hours E Company on the 2d Battalion right received a counterattack from the right flank which it repelled with well placed mortar and artillery fire. Apparently all units in the division were facing extremely heavy opposition and were making maximum use of their supporting fires. Division artillery reports firing 200-300 missions daily during this period. (27) The 1st Battalion, continued with its mission on the left flank keeping abreast of and in contact with the 16th Infantry. (28) The regimental picture was brighter than it had been since the offensive opened. The 3d Battalion gains showed a deep salient pushed into enemy territory, but the regiment was now entirely committed with its right flank open. The cost of ground gained had been extremely heavy in manpower - casualties had sapped the strength of the 1st and 2d Battalions,

(26) A-7; A-8
(27) A-6
(28) A-7; A-8

especially so in key personnel. The problem of assimilating replacements in this situation was particularly difficult. All of the rifle companies were dangerously low in strength at one time or another during the drive, moreover, those units needing reinforcements most were necessarily in contact and under fire. When the regiment was notified that replacements were available they were picked up at division and brought to the regimental rear CP where the regimental Executive Officer met and received them. There he saw to it that they had a hot meal and were properly clothed and equipped to join their units. They were then briefed on the Division and Regimental histories, on the type men they were to be with, or what to expect when they joined their companies, and all those things a newcomer should be acquainted with. Unfortunately they then were sent up to the Battalions, all of which were in line. It was impossible to get them to their companies in daylight - companies were generally attacking or in contact and under extremely heavy fire. At night when the Battalions had stopped and buttoned up the new men were brought to the company areas. Before they knew where they were the men were hustled to a foxhole or a site for one - to them it must have been a hell they never thought existed. As might be expected attrition was high among the newcomers. Many of them never made their first attack - their first night with a company in the line had cost them their lives or limbs. ^P The 1st and 3d Battalions were ordered to move again at 0800 hours. The 1st Battalion again was moving west and north against heavy opposition to protect the left flank by clearing woods to SCHEVENHUTTE road - contacting 16th Infantry. The

3d Battalion was moving north and east. As might be expected the Battalions eventually could no longer tie in and a gap developed between them. The regimental commander requested additional troops to cover the area between these units. The division commander made the Division reconnaissance troops immediately available and they were thrown into the line between the two rifle Battalions. As previously noted the 2d Battalion was still holding positions on the right flank north of the KLOSTER RUINS and was being probed by enemy patrols. The Battalion reported heavy casualties from the never-ending artillery and mortar fire, every round a tree burst, which over an extended period was falling at the rate of 500 rounds per hour by count. Finally at 1225 hours, elements of the 115th Grenadier Regiment, hit the Battalion with a strong attack - but by now the Battalion was firmly entrenched and by darkness was still holding its own when the enemy was forced to withdraw. The 3d Battalion moved well initially and by 1100 hours was on the high ground east of LAUFENBURG and south of the trail into MERODE from which they had observation of certain ROER valley towns to the north. Throughout the day the 3d Battalion received extremely heavy artillery and mortar fire. (30) The enemy had evidently gotten a fix on them once they had stopped. That was one of the great penalties of fighting in woods - once stopped the enemy got an accurate location and literally showered the area with artillery and mortars. Not that moving troops received none - that was not the case. The amount of fire received in woods fighting (all things being equal) was relative to fixing the target and friendly troops. Conversely, an enemy being pushed closely

(30) A-7; A-8

and rapidly is unable to bring down indirect fires on the pursuer - he happened to be as thin-skinned as his target when on the move toward his fatherland or elsewhere. At the end of the day the 3d Battalion held the high ground above and east of LAUFENBURG and positions across both roads running northeast and northwest about 1000 yards south of LAUFENBERG. The 1st Battalion held a line in the woods overlooking the north-south road extending from just south of HAMICH to the north for 1000 yards. Plans for the following day called for the 1st Battalion to pass through the 3d Battalion to take an objective in the vicinity of triangulation point 245 just west of MERODE, however Division insisted that the 1st Battalion remain in its present position in Division reserve because the 16th Infantry on our left had been receiving extremely heavy counterattacks.

By 0930 hours on 21 November the 16th Infantry situation cleared and Division released the 1st Battalion to regiment. Plans as outlined the previous day were put into orders and the 1st Battalion moved through the 3d east and then north toward the triangulation station and the road junction to the south but progress was slow as both Battalions took a heavy shelling. By 1600 hours the 1st Battalion had A Company 100 yards south of Point #4. After the 1st Battalion had passed through the 3d Battalion and moved forward a few hundred yards, the 3d Battalion brought the 3d Platoon, 734th TDs up to fire on LAUFENBURG castle preparatory to its attack to seize it. The four 3" guns fired 27 rounds of APC and 20 rounds of HE into the castle without once piercing the walls of the fortress. Lt. Colonel Corley had planned his attack to start as soon as the rounds

had been fired and he insisted that the attacks take place as planned - and fortunately so, because some of the Germans in the castle had been broken to the extent that they chose to be relieved of the responsibility of defending to the last man. As is customary some chose to fight longer but the 3d Battalion gained entry into the fortress and proceeded to mop up those remaining as holdouts. (31) Late in the afternoon Division ordered that the Regiment straighten out its line and tie in by the following morning.

The regiment's mission was to cover the right flank of the 18th Infantry Regiment in its attack for SCHONTAL on the morning 22 November.

Coordinating with the attack of the 18th Infantry on SCHONTAL, the 1st and 3d Battalions jumped off at 0800 hours. By noon the 1st Battalion had reached the high ground just south of their objective RJ (Point #5) when they received a great amount of direct fire from MERODE. Division artillery was requested to place a TOT on the town and did so within a short time. The results were apparently quite effective. For some time the 1st Battalion received little direct fires from MERODE; however, by late afternoon the 1st Battalion received a twenty minute enemy sponsored serenade of artillery and mortar fire which they estimated to consist of some 300 rounds of high explosives. The 2d and 3d Battalions moved little as they absorbed another day of punishing mortar and artillery fire. Casualties in all Battalions were heavy again. (32)

For the past seven days the medical aid stations were extremely busy places. Casualties were flowing through the aid

(31) A-7; A-8
(32) A-7; A-8

stations at a rate never before known in the Regiment. The company aid men performed their duties heroically as they always had. They suffered casualties too - a shell does not have a name on it: Captain Kurby, Battalion Surgeon of the 2d Battalion marvelled at the quality of work of the company aid men under fire. He stated that dressings were so well applied up front that the majority of casualties could be dispatched to the rear without further attention at the aid station. This was particularly gratifying information because approximately a month prior to this operation the Assistant Battalion Surgeon had been replaced by a lieutenant MSC in all Battalions. This change in the Battalion medical organization brought about an immediate improvement in the evacuation of casualties from front line units to aid stations. Since the new officer was not an MD his main job was administration and evacuation. In the forest they did a fine job of expediting and coordinating evacuation from the lines to aid station and aid station to rear. Even this increase in efficiency however could not overcome the delays brought about by local conditions - the extremely heavy casualties, lack of roads, and the shortage of medical personnel. The Regimental Surgeon was forced to request additional medical corps personnel to supplement his overworked crews. Army litter bearer teams were sent to regiment and were employed in front line evacuation of casualties. Even so, the heavy number of casualties coupled with the inability to transport by vehicle over the murky lanes allowed for much improvement. Regiment informed division of the fact that evacuation and supply problems were becoming more acute and requested that

a sufficient number of "Weasels", 1/4 ton tracked vehicles, be procured to alleviate worsening conditions. The regimental half-track vehicles were already being used but even these were not particularly mobile in this terrain. Within a short time six "Weasels" were attached to regiment which in turn released two to each battalion. Needless to say these new additions were immediately put into operation and worked days without cooling off. (33)

During the early evening hours of 22 November Division attached elements of the 4th Cavalry Group to the Regiment for employment in a defensive role and to cover the gap on the regiments right flank - in order to release the 2d Battalion for further offensive actions in the direction of MERODE.

On the 23d of November only the 3d Battalion moved. By noon the Battalion was north of #155 and its reserve company was in contact with the 18th Infantry on the left. Early in the evening the 3d Battalion was forced to stop and button up short of hill #200. The 2d Battalion situation was unchanged from the previous day's with the exception of E Company on the right flank which had been relieved by elements of the 4th Cavalry Group. The relief was to continue the following morning and be complete by dark. As planned the 2d Battalion was entirely relieved on the 24th and pulled back for a short rest and preparation for the final push out of the forest. (34) The 2d Battalion had moved into reserve positions in the vicinity of the Regimental C.P. awaiting final orders for the MERODE push. As the Battalion C. P. Group moved into its area enemy artillery hit them before they had dug their foxholes. The

(33) Personal knowledge

(34) A-7; A-8

artillery liaison officer was killed, the Battalion S-3 wounded, and several C.P. personnel were killed or wounded. (35)

During the day the 1st and 3d Battalions were ordered to hold what they had, consolidate, and tie in. By noon the Battalions reported that they were tied in just south of triangulation point 245. The line was now facing east from the south boundary to Hill 245, then facing north with the 3d Battalion. The 3d Battalion moved north along trail #6 to tie in with the 18th Infantry. For the next two days no offensive action of note took place. Both sides patrolled extensively sparring as though looking for an opening. Advance notice had been given by Division that JUNGERSDORF would be the next regimental objective. The 3d Battalion commander was advised that it would be his job in order that he might feel out the opposition by patrols and begin planning his method of attack. On 27 November Corps ordered the Division to take LANGERWEHE^N and JUNGERSDORF. The 18th Infantry was given the job of taking LANGERWEHE simultaneous to the 26th taking JUNGERSDORF. Regiment then ordered the 2d Battalion to send one Company to take over part of 3d Battalion area adjacent to the 1st Battalion. At 1500 hours the 3d Battalion jumped off with K Company taking the high ground to the south of the town and overlooking it. I and L Companies moved cross-country into JUNGERSDORF and were engaged in extremely heavy fighting. The Battalion Commander dispatched the tanks and TDs into the town to support the companies in clearing it. The companies were so notified, and met the vehicles and proceeded to mop up resistance. By dark the town was reported taken and secured. At about 0300 hours

(35) Personal knowledge

the K Company positions on the high ground overlooking JUNGERSDORF were heavily counterattacked. One of the 3d Battalion TDs was knocked out and another was threatened before the counter-attack was repelled. During this action one of the Battalion 57 mm AT guns knocked out a Mark IV tank. Later in the morning about 1000 hours the enemy counterattacked JUNGERSDORF. Now we had observation and the enemy was caught in the open and given the treatment. His forces, unsuccessful in taking JUNGERSDORF withdrew toward LANGERWEHE where the 18th Infantry was attacking. Friendly artillery took the back tracking enemy force under fire and caused extremely heavy casualties. Later in the day as friendly aircraft hovered over our lines the enemy dropped red smoke on JUNGERSDORF in an attempt to get the US Air Corps to bomb the 3d Battalion, however, the trick was detected in time to prevent the bombing. (36)

Now that JUNGERSDORF had been taken plans were made for sending the 2nd Battalion east to seize the town of MERODE. The 1st Reconnaissance Company and the reconnaissance platoon of the 734th TD Battalion were attached to the regiment to hold positions between the 1st and 3d Battalions. The 2d Battalion was then ordered to attack east along the unimproved road to clear the woods (500-600) yards and take and hold the town of MERODE. The remainder of the regiment was to hold its present line. Except for the 3d Battalion positions on the north (facing north) the line was well inside the forest on high ground with little if any observation of the ROER RIVER valley to the east. (37)

At 1000 hours on 29 November, after an artillery prepara-

(36) A-7; A-8

(37) Personal knowledge

tion, the 2d Battalion jumped off with Companies E and F, each reinforced with a Heavy Machine gun platoon. From the outset the attacking troops received heavy artillery and mortar fire as they plodded through the last enemy defenses in the forest. Again they hit well dug-in enemy behind a mesh of wire and mines. Of the estimated 350 personnel in the assault approximately 130 were casualties before the two companies emerged from the forest into the open overlooking MERODE. (38)

Moving out for the assault on the town, Lt. (now Capt.) John D. Hamilton, Company Commander of F Company called for the tanks and TDs to be employed in the clearing of the town. The companies proceeded with their assault on the town and seized that portion along the road east into town. G Company moved up and held the edge of the woods facing MERODE. Meantime, the tanks had been dispatched and appeared on the outer edge of the woods where they drew considerable fire. Two of these tanks proceeded to join the companies and helped in clearing the remainder of the town. However, MERODE, a small town, is joined with its larger neighbor SCHLICH so that it is difficult to tell where one ends and the other begins. Companies E and F took all that they could hold and the enemy held the rest strongly. The defense consisted mainly of holding the houses along the two roads of MERODE.

While the companies organized their positions the enemy in SCHLICH took MERODE under fire with their tanks and assault guns and kept all of the buildings and the two tanks covered. During the day the two tanks left the troops in MERODE and made an attempt to return to the forest. (39) On their way, west

(38) Statement by Major T. J. Gendron, Bn. Ex O; Personal Experience

(39) Statement by Captain J. D. Hamilton, then Company Commander, F Company.

of the town on the only road back, one of the tanks bogged down in the mud and turned over and the other was hit by an enemy shell. They now blocked the road so that it could no longer be used to reinforce the troops in town. About this time it was noted that communications to the town were particularly bad, Lt. Hamilton did have intermittent contact with his SCR 300 until approximately 2200 hours, thereafter no contact whatsoever was made except by one runner.

That night a coordinated German infantry and tank attack on E and F Companies systematically proceeded to wipe out or capture the group in MERODE. The gallant fighters had no defense except their small arms against the tanks and infantry moving in. Fighting lasted throughout the night. At daybreak G Company could observe enemy tanks firing directly into the E and F Company buildings. German tanks drove their guns into windows and blasted the insides of buildings then infantry moved in to mop up. Finally on 30 November the Germans had recaptured MERODE. Throughout the seige, patrols were sent from Battalion to the Companies in MERODE but none ever reached the town. One patrol consisted of twelve (12) bazooka teams to make up for the lack of armor in the defense of the town but it never reached E and F Companies. The enemy had apparently first cut off the town from the forest by setting up a line west of MERODE. Any movement toward the town drew immediate and intense small arms, mortar, and artillery fire. The platoon of engineers and tank recovery tried to clear the road several times but were unable to remove the obstacles under the terrific fire. During the night in question several illuminating

shell fire missions were fired in an attempt to catch enemy reinforcements in the open. (40)

At the time MERODE was counterattacked the regiment had no reserve. It is estimated that G Company had an effective strength of approximately 50 men employed in the line holding the edge of the forest west of MERODE. (41) Division at first alerted a battalion of the 16th Infantry then ordered the 18th Infantry to relieve elements of the 3rd Battalion in JUNGERSDORF on 30 November. It was evening before the 3d Battalion became available - that was too late. Strong patrols were unable to make any progress toward the town. In fact the enemy was beginning to feel aggressive, he had regained the initiative in MERODE and apparently decided to continue. During the day he launched an attack on the 1st Reconnaissance Company positions just north and west of MERODE which was broken up by our mass of artillery and mortars. (42)

On 1 December the two companies were given for lost. Four 2d Battalion men who had been taken prisoners escaped and returned to our lines confirming the fact that there were no longer any friendly troops in MERODE. The regimental front required all available troops - any major move might so weaken the line as to make it vulnerable in the event of enemy attack and so for that reason the 1st and 3d Battalions were ordered to hold what they had and to clear the woods in their respective areas. The 1st Battalion was to clear the area south of the MERODE road and the 3d Battalion, the area southeast of JUNGERSDORF. (43) The 3d Battalion cleared its area during the day while the 1st Battalion ran into heavy fighting and

(40) Personal knowledge; A-7; A-8
(41) Personal knowledge; Statement by Major T. J. Bendron
(42) A-7; A-8
(43) A-7; A-8

cleared little. G Company pulled back on line with the 1st Battalion and held its position north of the road. For the next three days only the 1st Battalion moved, sweeping its assigned area against heavy resistance. Enemy captured by the 1st Battalion during this action told of the enemy's recent reinforcement to the 1st Battalion front. (44)

On 4 December, division notified the regiment that elements of the 9th U. S. Infantry Division would relieve the 26th Infantry on 5 December. During the afternoon of 4 December, reconnaissance parties from the 9th Infantry Division arrived to plan the relief and gather information of their new area. On 5 December the regiment was relieved and moved to a rear bivouac area in the vicinity of HENRI-CHAPPELLE for rest and rehabilitation. (45)

SUMMARY

The operations of the 26th Infantry in the drive for the ROER RIVER were generally successful. Along the front of the VII Corps no unit had made progress farther to the east. The tenacity of the enemy on his home grounds west of the ROER RIVER forecast a long winter campaign.

Except for the attack on MERODE the regiment did creditable work. If the MERODE incident was a fiasco it was so because the regiment had not secured the ground necessary to launch a successful attack on the town.

The 26th Infantry Regiment had absorbed its greatest punishment of the war fighting through approximately three miles of forest against a determined enemy. (The cost to the

(44) A-7; A-8
(45) A-6

regiment - approximately 2000 casualties in less than 20 days!)

The weather and terrain had favored the enemy throughout the operation and he took full advantage of both. (46)

ANALYSIS AND CRITICISM

1. OBJECTIVE - MERODE

The attack on MERODE was ordered at a time when the regiment was ill-prepared for it. The woods had not yet been cleared. To the east along the regimental front there was still approximately 500-600 yards of forest to clear before reaching the open ground west of MERODE. The 1st Battalion on the right was not ordered to, and did not jump off with the 2d Battalion in a limited objective attack to clear the wooded area to the east of the 1st Battalion positions. On the left flank of the 2d Battalion the line was held by reconnaissance troops - certainly they were not capable of offensive action in heavy woods. Their organization, equipment, and training precludes their use on that type mission. The enemy facing the regiment had at no time given an indication of fighting a mere delaying action, much less executing a withdrawal. Pushing a salient into territory favorable to them was an invitation to disaster. MERODE is a very small town adjacent to and actually tied into its larger neighbor, SCHLICH, which was not a part or portion of the objective. It is evident that the attack was ordered before terrain essential to the attack's success had been taken and that the objective was not a logical one to be taken and held. The objective was only a portion of a tactically

(46) Personal knowledge

sound mission assignment.

2. REPLACEMENTS

The manner in which replacements are received and indoctrinated is extremely important. No doubt the first impression of the groups assigned to the regiment during this period were good but the follow-up treatment of sending them directly to units in the line - necessarily at night during a period where fighting was roughest - where it was just about impossible for the newcomer to get acquainted with his buddy could not be other than detrimental to morale.

At the time when casualties were so heavy the regiment had little choice in the matter if it were to execute an attack with any strength at all. However it was noted that the casualty rate among the replacements during this period was much higher than among older hands. Later during the Battle of the Bulge, these same companies did properly assimilate a large number of replacements during the short rest period immediately following this operation, and bore the brunt of attacks by a Panzer Division and performed as well as the best of the veterans before them.

3. WOODS FIGHTING -- FIRE LANES

When fighting in the woods, fire lanes should be avoided. Strolling down or across a fire lane in the front lines is just as dangerous in woods fighting as strolling on, or crossing a street is to city, town, or village fighting. The defender will naturally cover the lanes with final protective lines and defensive fires. This was evident to regimental troops the

very first day in the forest. Because the above pertains to lanes in the front lines it is not intended that inference be made that fire lanes to the rear were overlooked - they were not. Heavy fire was placed on lanes to the rear to prevent their uninterrupted use for mortar emplacements, supply routes, CPs, or other installations. It was found that clearings as they existed were generally preferable for gun emplacements and locations for installations.

4. FIRE PLANS

Extreme care must be taken to properly and accurately identify and report units location when fighting in woods. It is necessary that a unit commander constantly know where all elements of his unit are in order that he might call for mortar or artillery fire on the target when he needs it. Because it is normally difficult to locate oneself in heavily wooded terrain due to lack of observation and lack of easily identified objects or features in the immediate area or within sight, the leader must constantly orient himself to the ground with his maps, photos, or charts. All units were impressed with this fact especially when they stopped, were stopped, or buttoned up for the night. If close defensive fires were to be placed to a unit's front the maximum effect could be achieved only if the fires could be placed as close to the front lines as possible to hit the enemy in his assault position, and far enough forward to clear friendly lines. Only by accurate locating and reporting of positions could such a fire plan be made up.

5. NIGHT DEFENSE IN WOODS

This subject is a controversial one, consequently it is felt that both analyses, the writer's and another ~~will~~ be discussed briefly.

Quoted herewith is a statement taken from the conclusions section of the G-3, Report of Operations, 1st U. S. Infantry Division, 1-30 November 1944, par. 7.,

"About two hours after stopping for the night, or under cover of darkness, company commanders have found it advisable to move platoons 400 to 500 yards back from their initial positions, leaving strong outposts. The majority of the company is thereby removed from the area that is most likely to receive the heaviest enemy artillery and mortar concentrations. In this way, if they were observed, only a platoon gets the enemy attack or artillery or mortar fire, instead of the entire company."

It is known that some units tried this line withdrawal tactics - and at times it might have been successful, but generally enemy pressure by patrols, night attacks, or counter-attacks made it unfeasible. It is known that it did not work when tried consistently. Moreover a loss of 400-500 yards was often more than a day's attack had gained - and it would definitely be a loss if the enemy knew or even summarized that a withdrawal had been effected. During this operation he generally knew because he maintained contact. It is the opinion of the writer that this tactic of withdrawing the main force is not generally acceptable.

6. INFORMATION OF THE ENEMY AND TERRAIN

Timely information of the enemy and the terrain is essential to the degree of success in battle. It is doubtful that the regiment had sufficient information of enemy forces in the MERODE - SCHLICH area otherwise one battalion would not have been sent across the open into the town against a superior force. The 2d Battalion's attack was made at a time when the remainder of the regiment was entirely committed. Once in MERODE, E and F Companies were on their own. Moreover the road leading to the town was little more than a muddy trail with deep ditches on either side. When the first two tanks were bogged down the road was blocked preventing reinforcement with armor.

7. THE REGIMENTAL ZONE

A main attack should be made on a narrow front, -- particularly in heavily forested terrain. ✓

The regiment's zone in this operation should have been narrowed as the regiment moved ahead of its flank units or its attack held up until all were abreast. After the first few days the three battalions were almost constantly committed. Hence additional troops were required and brought in to hold the line while the rifle battalions continued the attack. Even so, when the MERODE attack was launched there were no reserves available in the regimental zone to continue the attack or reinforce the companies in the town. It is particularly important to note that as the units slowed down or stopped casualties increased tremendously. Conversely,

as the attack progressed and troops closed in with the enemy casualties decreased because the enemy artillery and mortar fires were forced to lift.

8. CONTACT -- OBSERVATION

Although contact on right and left is essential at all times it is most essential in wooded terrain. The need for a close tie-in is naturally required because of the lack of observation, it is obvious that open terrain can be covered by fire more easily because most movement thereupon is seen, even at night. In wooded terrain a determined enemy can not only locate gaps but he can by stealth infiltrate a sizable force through a loose defense without its being known to the defender. No influence^{ER} is intended that this be the rule only in a night defense, -- the proximity of daylight tie-in is only relative to observation.

LESSONS

1. Terrain essential to the success of the attack and defense of an objective must be held prior to the attack to secure that objective.

2. Replacements should never join an unit in the line when it is in contact with the enemy.

3. When fighting in wooded terrain fire lanes should be avoided.

4. The most effective use of defensive and/or supporting fires can be had only when accurate locations of friendly units are known.

5. When stopped for the night in heavy woods it is believed that a limited withdrawal of the main force for any reason is questionable if not entirely erroneous.

6. Timely information of the enemy and the terrain is essential to a successful attack.

7. A unit attacking in woods on a wide front is slowed down to the extent that casualties increase at an accelerating rate.

8. In heavily wooded terrain the importance of contact increases in degree as observation decreases.